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MEDAL, CARDINAL PIETRO BEMBO, BY BENVENUTO CELLINI

THE ART OF THE MEDALIST

BY ADELINE ADAMS

HOWEVER careful our newspapers may be to satisfy a breathless public curiosity by reporting the exact tonnage of each great monument the moment it is unveiled, the fact remains that sculpture joins with all the other arts in a general defiance of any valuation by weight, bulk or dimension. A colossal group signed by mediocrity does far less toward making the world go round than does a medal by a master—a little medal “about as large as the hand of a child of twelve years,” to quote one of Cellini’s favorite units of measure.

Thus for nearly five centuries the medals of Pisanello and his contemporaries have had a decided and fairly continuous effect on the art of sculpture in general, and the portrait-relief in particular. When Pisanello has been most forgotten, as in the chilly reliefs of our pseudo-classic era, then it would seem that the ancients themselves have been consulted chiefly for their defects; and when Pisanello has been weakly copied,

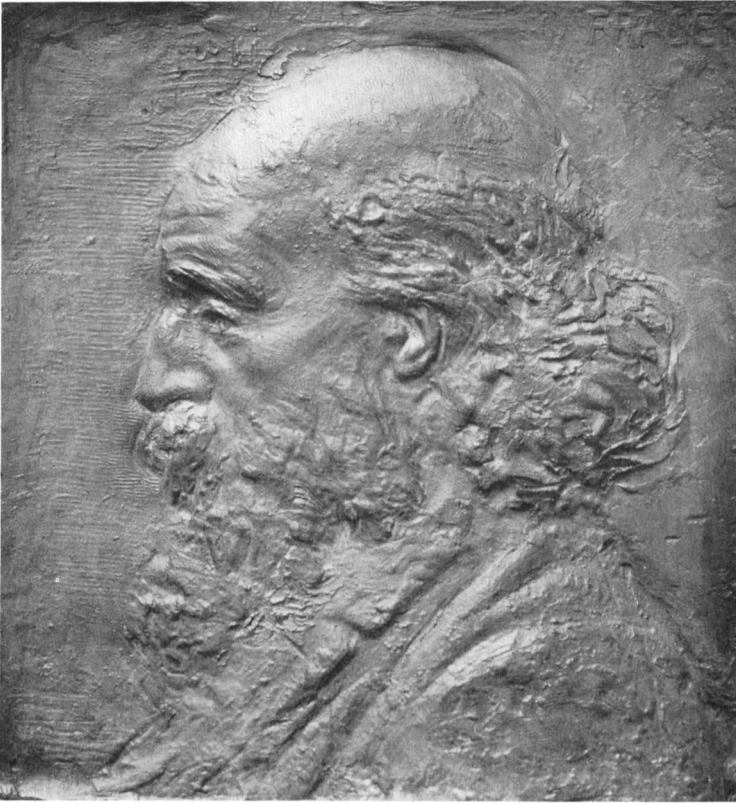
at long range, for the wrong things—or rather for things which in him are qualities and in ourselves defects, in him vital truths and in ourselves “dead unhappy tales of bygone minstrelsy”—why, then, we have but ourselves and our ideals to blame for the poor results.

In the profile portraits of the Renaissance, the arts of painting and sculpture owned a legitimate mutual sway, borrowing and lending in decent frankness. The so-called “Simonetta” attributed to Botticelli (modern research enjoins such reserve) will serve as a type of countless examples showing the zest with which painters used the closely modeled line and the sculpturally designed composition to render the psychology of a sitter. Pisanello’s procedure may have been all the more sympathetic to painters, inasmuch as he was himself a painter, as announced in the oft-repeated signature, *Opus Pisani Pictoris*, or *Pisanus Pictor Fecit*. Lest our Latin fail us in studying his Palæologus medal—the first work of

this kind from his hand, and now accepted as the prototype of the medal of to-day—he has signed it not only in Latin, but in Greek, leaving the date (probably 1439) to the care of history; and when critics try to think out how it was that this life-force of a fellow Vittore Pisano could have happened, he

Alfonso I. Unlike the well-known Carrara and Sesto medals, struck during the last decade of the fourteenth century, the Constantine and Heraclius medals were too large to have been struck by the die-processes of their time.

Furthermore, the typical Renaissance medal, in its best estate, is cast rather



HEAD OF AN OLD MAN, BY JAMES E. FRASER

and his great little works, after the meager, almost non-existent medallic output of the Middle Ages, they seize on the slender thread of this twin inscription to trace in this medal the influence of the bi-lingually inscribed Constantine medal, a gold copy of which is inventoried under date of 1402 in the collection of Jean, Duc de Berri, brother of Charles V; moreover, a certain likeness is established between the reverse of the Heraclius medal, in the same collection, and that of Pisanello's triumph medal of

than struck, though, of course, other methods of reproduction were employed according to the necessities of the case. Set forth in the freely-flowing bronze, that medal is to the sculpture of its time what the short story is to the literary art of to-day; and the Quattrocento medal, like the twentieth century tale, shows a really wonderful flowering. Pisanello may be called a Guy de Maupassant, whose works are *Bronze Tales of the Despots*. Within the narrow round of each medal, a real drama is played, a



REVERSE OF MEDAL, LIONEL D'ESTE. BY PISANO

life's whole manuscript unrolled. Each obverse states with directness what manner of man is before our eyes; each reverse tells, with a sheer poetical veracity like that of Dante's "daily dreadful line," just what that man counted for in the world. One side portrays the person, the other commemorates his deed; and history has not yet given the lie to Pisanello's bronze statements. To-day, our American medal seems a natural outpouring from the heart of a republic; our Washingtons and our Lincolns and our Roosevelts are medalled in battalions; our little portrait reliefs, perfectly reduced from larger models, seem to-day the intimate, spontaneous expression of life's amenities. Yet the medal had its beginnings in despotism; it was cradled in the collections of overlords wishing to add to the pagan glories of their cabinets new examples of a new art fitted to blow abroad their own deeds of greatness; above all, it was the result of a new-born passion for individuality and its expression in art—a passion that was everywhere blazing up out of the smouldering embers of medievalism. Thus though many a little old Greek town had had its own Mint for the crude striking of lovely coins, and though the ancients had no doubt their commemorative struck pieces of larger size than that of the coin, the medal as we know it to-day first

ambled into Italy on the back of the Palæologus horse, as an advance body-guard to Donatello's Gattamelata, and Verocchio's Colleoni; it heralded a double revival, that of bronze-casting as well as hero-worship.

That Pisanello could and did observe and create for himself, while delighting in the antique, is shown at once in the reverse of his first medal. Rodin remarks, in one of those preachments of his which are better than some of his practice, "I do not imitate the Greeks; I try to put myself in the spiritual state of the men who have left us the antique statues." Exactly Pisanello's idea! The Palæologus reverse shows, in classic side view, the ambling horse and the prayerful horseman, occupying most of the field of the relief in their progress past a wayside shrine; incidentally, the figure of a mounted squire is added; horse and rider displayed, painter-fashion, in a rear view, properly foreshortened. In other medals, he uses spirited variations of this secondary equestrian motive. To the star performer in each little equestrian drama, he generally allots the large lines of the pure profile view; to the attendant knights or pages, he permits the pictorial three-quarter view, rear. It must be admitted that this rear view, with all its variants, has proved both an example and a stumbling-block for his followers.



MEDAL BY JOHN FLANAGAN



MEDAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE ARTS AND LETTERS
BY A. A. WEINMAN

In the medal of Sigismondo Malatesta, the wild and turbulent tyrant of Rimini, inveterate wife-slayer, brigand who united to all the great vices of the Renaissance its universal virtue, a passion for art and the new learning, Pisanello shows us the overlord, armed and mounted, storming forth from his castle; the horse, in an admirably-observed attitude, paws the stones, while the rider lifts up a mailed right arm in a gesture of command. The date is 1445, six years before Donatello was called to Padua to model the Gattamelata, the first great equestrian statue of the Renaissance. The equestrian medals and the equestrian statues of the day reacted on each other, just as both were powerfully influenced by the newly revealed treasures of antique art. In the medal of Francesco Sforza, the Condottiere proclaimed Duke of Milan in 1450, the reverse shows simply a proud profile of a horse's head, a sword, and a book or two; all is plain and stern, like the man himself. For Lionel d'Este, on the contrary, an elaborate reverse is designed, perhaps on the occasion of his marriage; it reveals a very large Lion, listening intently to a very small Love, singing intently, by note, from a scroll. Indeed, a certain intentness broods over Pisanello's people and animals; they seem absorbed in what they are doing; they have a curiously

convincing air of believing their business to be significant and worth while.

Among the four and twenty works signed by Pisanello, together with the twelve others attributed to him, we find but one portrait of a woman, the young Mantuan Cicilia Gonzaga—a candid, charming profile, of "blond modeling"; the idyllic beauty of the reverse recalls some austere pastoral scene by Puvis de Chavannes; under a crescent moon, a lightly draped virginal figure is seated among rocks, with the unicorn, the emblem of maidenhood, at her side. The piece has further interest, as it is one of a group of medals showing the gentler side of family life in the Renaissance; among these is the portrait of the kindly humanist, Vittorino da Feltre, tutor to Cicilia and her brothers; his medal-reverse has the device of a pelican feeding her young—a symbol of this master's self-sacrifice. In the field of the medal-reverse, Pisanello has not yet been surpassed for truth, spontaneity, simplicity, imagination, for the personal note and the charm of the unexpected. He uses the boasts of heraldry to give us, not ordinary conventions, but breathing transcripts from the animal world, splendid compositions showing the horse, the lion, the unicorn, the eagle, the lynx; and his notes and sketches preserved in the Louvre shed light on his care in studying form, movement and character in man and beast. He and a long line of successors made the Renaissance medal a vital art-force.



REVERSE OF JOHN PAUL JONES MEDAL
BY VICTOR D. BRENNER

Small in size, Pisanello's pieces are great in spirit; they are virile works without a trace of the petty, or pretty, or perfunctory. Can we say as much of the medals produced to-day? "There are too many islands in the world," sighs the poet. Were he to glance, ever so briefly, at the medals of two hemispheres, he would certainly add, too many fountains, clouds and rocks, too many scrolls and balances and triangles, too many laurels, bays and oak-leaves, too many swags and tags of all sorts. Even the French are great sinners along these paths, largely because of a certain something which flourishes even in France, though popularly supposed to have its habitat in Oklahoma or Abyssinia—I mean bad taste. It is not customary to mention this, because France is truly a queen among countries, and what she says, goes, as the phrase is; but to my mind that is the very reason why we should stop and think about it. To do so will argue no disrespect toward our foster-mother in the arts, but will rather follow the French ideal that counsels clarity of thought. France easily leads the world in the art of the medalist. By long years of effort, the earlier masters, David d'Angers, Oudiné, and especially Ponscarne, paved the way for that brilliant renaissance revealed in the latter part of the nineteenth century by a host of distinguished artists, among whom we may cite three who have lately died, but whose influence continues—Chaplain, Roty and Charpentier, each with a genius of highly personal quality. It is but a crude way of putting it to say that Chaplain's medals immortalize France's glory; Roty's, her poetry, and Charpentier's, her labor; for each could on occasion exchange his wonted rôle, and make of his medal an epic, or a lyric, or a bit of fine prose. Again, it would be too summary to state that Charpentier foreshadows a modern trend in art, while Chaplain resumes the best that a splendid tradition offers.

The strength of the French medal lies in its assured arrangement, its sense of movement and mass, its practised draughtsmanship of bone and muscle,

and a thousand other good things the school can teach. Its weakness is apt to come from tasteless, overworked symbolism. Roty, whose lovely lyric quality is known to the world through his figure "La Semeuse," adopted in the French coinage, is seen at his very best in those plaquettes and medals in which the whole emotion of love or piety is exhaled through the figures alone, without benefit of bedizened background. Chaplain, whose life and work are a noble example of what the École may do for France, is greatest in his wonderful portraits of great men, greatly observed and greatly interpreted in medal obverses unadorned with any except the simplest of legends and inscriptions. But how often, in France as in every other country, the modern medal is marred by a tasteless and even insincere jumble of symbols, wholly unconvincing to the spectator because he who has used them is himself wholly unconvinced! Such usages, if prevalent everywhere, would leave the medalist behind the other commentators of his age; for in literature, and in the drama, and even in painting, much beautiful, sympathetic and sincere criticism of life is to be found. As a tasteless jumble of symbols, we may refer to I know not whose medal immortalizing Sculpture—a medal showing a woman's head, with bay-leaves, calipers and hammer twined in her hair. It is a poor sort of symbolism which touches nothing that it does not overadorn! Bold Futurist spirits bitterly assail the Renaissance for the materialism imputed to modern art. The fault, if it exists, is not in our predecessors, but in ourselves. And master medalist, if you yourself do not *really* love oak, olive, laurel, dove, unicorn and lion for their beauty or their terribleness, if you yourself do not *really* believe that some specific quality or meaning of theirs belongs to the person or event your medal tells of, in its short story, why, then, best let such fauna and flora alone. If you dot them about the field automatically, even though according to the best recipe "*pour allonger une sauce*," your perfunctoriness will find you out. The sketches of Pisanello and the note-books

of Leonardo, men of wholly opposite types, prove in these artists, not merely skill and knowledge, but conviction.

Nor is all modern symbolism necessarily futile; the sincere poetic allegory will never die. Among the many notable works of our American medalist Brenner is a struck plaquette, in silver, made in honor of James McNeill Whistler. The obverse shows the painter, in his habit as he was, his brow starred with the famous silver lock. The reverse bears, on an open field (with the butterfly flitting through it, and the legend *Messieurs les Ennemis* not far away), a splendid peacock treated with such loveliness of design and detail as to make the beauty of it all predominate greatly over the satire. The whole bears evidence of being done with that delight in artistic work which Dr. Eliot has stated as one of our country's chief needs.

Very beautiful in poetic significance is the plaquette designed by Augustus Saint-Gaudens as a token of gratitude to all who took part in the "Masque of the Golden Bowl," offered to the sculptor on a famous anniversary. Within its harmonious oblong are shown the columns and the blazing altar and the Greek seat that figured in the scene, framed by the proscenium arch of great New England pines, and by the stage-curtain crowned with masks invented by the joyous fancy of Maxfield Parrish; below is the triumphal chariot; and, as the symbol of the love that prompted the pageant, there stands by the altar the winged figure of Amor, who has borrowed the lyre of Apollo. The names of all the seventy figurants are beautifully inscribed, making a decoration for certain spaces in the background; this feature, naturally prized by those who received the medal, was made possible by modeling the original on a large scale. Crowning all is the Golden Bowl itself. Here is no hodge-podge of unrelated symbols, but a beautiful and lovingly considered arrangement of deeply significant things. Were this design a creation of the Renaissance, it would be acclaimed and studied to-day as a masterpiece of the medalist's art. We associ-

ate with it the same sculptor's Columbus medal-obverse, and many reductions, in plaquette form, from his famous portrait reliefs. While delighting in the conceptions of antiquity and the Renaissance, Saint-Gaudens, more than any other master of his day, made a faithful study of all the conditions of the modern portrait relief; and most of the sculptors who came under the influence of his studio have produced excellent examples of the medal and its allied forms.

The dual personality of the medal increases its opportunities, both for good and evil. Its two sides offer two subjects, demanding perhaps two sorts of gifts. It looks both ways as regards painting and sculpture. It has a perfect right to borrow certain ideas from the painter's art, but like relief in general, it merely degrades itself if, like a poor dog with two masters, it knows not to which house it really belongs. Again, there are two principal ways by which it may be mechanically reproduced; by striking in the steel die, or by casting in molten metal. Other methods, of course, exist; at a recent exhibition of the American Numismatic Society, there were modern German medals carved by hand directly from bronze, together with examples cast from carved boxwood or carved stone moulds. We recall Cellini's admiration of "that most excellent craftsman of ability, who was a Milanese named Messer Caradosso. He dealt in nothing but little chiseled medals, made of plates of metal, and such like things."

The medal destined for a large circulation will naturally be struck. That of which but few copies are to be made may well be cast. The advantages and disadvantages offered by each method are best understood by the medalist himself; temperament plays its part. The painstaking conscientious Teuton will make it an act of religious faith to cling to the clean, hard, correct, coin-like way of doing things, while the imaginative, irresponsible Latin will eagerly grasp out for the facile freedom of looser methods.

At the time of our Columbian Exposition, a great Homeric laugh rippled through our young sculptors' studios, be-

cause of a query said to have been issued by our Mint apropos of Mr. Saint-Gaudens's ability to make the Columbus medal. "But is this Saint-Gaudens a practical die-sinker?" In repeating this question, strong men, or shall we say, men who have since become strong, wiped away their tears of joy on their blouse-sleeves. The query was doubtless mythical; it has an air of folk-lore about it. Even in the midst of their mirth, the young men probably remembered that this master had in his youth been apprenticed to Avet, "a cameo-cutter, and a hard man"; and that the lessons of that apprenticeship were highly regarded by the sculptor. From the day of the ancient Greek drachma with its owl sitting on an amphora down to that of Mr. Fraser's new five-cent piece, which we hope before many moons to be passing to polite car-conductors, the story of the Mint and the medalist is a long one. Often it would seem as if the artist had been forced to "drop his blood for drachmas"—rather a salutary measure in choleric Benvenuto's case, perhaps. On the other hand, it has happened that sculptors, when called upon to design and model coins, have proved so rebellious against the rigors of the game, that they have scarcely played fair, either to the Mint or to the art of their country; the artistic temperament and the cold conditions of the case have not kissed each other. Perhaps even while admiring the fine flat simple effect of a much-worn two-sou piece, bearing the profile of the third Napoleon, a sculptor will forget that one of the conditions of the coin is that it must stack well; and very likely, in designing his coin, he will grumble because he must put away all thought of that undercutting so dear and useful to him in a relief to be cast in bronze. In a word, he admires the lovely obliteration of the worn coin, without profiting from its suggestion. In older countries, a connection, however vague, between the Mint and the École, has generally resulted in a coinage that is better-looking than ours, though the past decade has seen progress among us in this respect.

It is the business of the artist to be

ancestor as well as descendant, to teach future ages as well as to con the good old lesson of bygone days. If Pisanello did so well, just by studying the ancients and remaining himself, why may not we do still better, by the same rule? Unquestionably the technical processes of medal-making are to-day greatly superior to those of the elder age. The arts of die-sinking and of bronze-casting are more highly developed, and the invention of the reducing-machine makes it possible for the sculptor to expand his little medal idea boldly and freely in a large size. Here, as in every aid, there is also a snare. Often proportions which are reproduced with absolute accuracy on a changed scale no longer appear to be the proportions the artist has intended. It is argued by many purists that a thing which is meant to be small must be designed and modeled so, and in no other wise; and that details like horses' knees or women's hair or children's cheeks, if modeled on a large scale, are treated with an insistence which in the reduction resolves itself into a mechanical absurdity. It is easily seen that in real life, Art and Science do not always clasp each other as cordially as in the allegories of the academic medal! Most sculptors, however, regard the reducing-machine as a legitimate and valuable aid.

As to our modern subjects in art, let us not make the blunder of telling ourselves that men, women, children and events were more interesting during the Renaissance than they are to-day. On the contrary, people and things are just as good, just as bad, and just as immortal as ever they were; and it is for our medals to prove it. One big reason why Pisanello's reliefs were not poor things, is that they were his own; they told himself and his times. And if the medal is called the short story of sculpture, let us not forget that in literature, Americans have shown a certain lively gift for the tale. We have an unparalleled talent for swift iridescent speech, for that poetry of the pavement known as slang, the humble small coin of the nobler metaphor and simile. Perhaps we shall some day disclose a commanding genius in the medal.